

BOOK REVIEW

MILTON M. BERGER, M.D.: *Working with People Called Patients*. New York, Brunner, Mazel, 1977. xii + 154 pp., illustrated. \$7.95.

USING a graphic, large-format presentation, Dr. Berger's handbook for beginning health-care workers such as myself (I am a member of the class of 1979 at the University of Toronto Faculty of Medicine) is intended as a guide to aid in understanding and approaching people with emotional problems and to simplify and summarize concepts which he has found truly therapeutic in his 35 years of clinical experience.

Dr. Berger observes in *Working with People Called Patients* that "psychotherapists with different theoretical training achieve similar results," (page 51) and suggest that the essential components in successful therapy are the therapist's understanding and his approach to mental health. Success depends upon the therapist's "active, hopeful, interested, and whole hearted personality rather than on the intellectual wisdom of his question, interpretations, and comments." (page 50) There will be hope for the mentally disabled, he says, so long as we "continue to reach toward them in a unified fashion of knowledge, empathy, sureness, with mutuality, and with a high level of interest *and* personal regard." (page 5)

The book includes characteristics of normal and pathological functioning, family and social dynamics, methods of assessment and diagnosis, therapeutic techniques, and careers in mental health. The magnitude and scope of the undertaking alone create difficulties.

The presentation is light, informed, and refreshingly free of jargon. The book is constructed around the subject matter and there are no chapters to speak of. Each new concept is presented as a section in its own right, and continuity is maintained through the apposition of related ideas.

A short, positive, and philosophical history of psychiatry opens the book, and the sections which follow belie many myths and reaffirm some facts about mental patients and mental disease. A multifactorial model for the causation of psychiatric disease and the intimate association between mind, body, and environment with their manifestations is outlined. The psychiatric patient is presented "not as someone to whom something is *done* as occurs in the usual medical situation, but with whom the physician must interact genuinely."

At this point the definition, ranges, and some pertinent features of normal mental function are discussed, with emphasis on the variability within normal and abnormal populations. There is a fine section on family function.

Having introduced the field, Dr. Berger discusses his approach to mental dysfunction, ranges of normal, the types of patients a young clinician is likely to encounter, the role of medication, therapeutic techniques, and such basic concepts as the distinction between the therapeutic and the antitherapeutic.

Empathy, sympathy, trust, hope, and communication emerge as key concepts. While Dr. Berger accepts the age-old principles of diagnosis, he emphasizes the necessity of diagnostic fluidity in response to the challenge of this "changing battleground." For successful treatment he repeats that patients should be approached not as specimens of psychopathology but as suffering persons wrestling with problems of living or with distressing or incapacitating symptoms. Since the patient must be seen at all times as a person, "health care workers must develop the capacity to identify with the patient...while simultaneously retaining objectivity." (page 56) It is hoped that this will encourage the patient to accept rational therapeutic goals and to realize that he plays a role in his own treatment.

The book's weaknesses stem from its broad scope and the intensity of the author's convictions. A young student desiring an etiological, epidemiological, or clinical framework for his studies will find the book wanting. Dr. Berger plays down the constitutional components of psychiatric disease, and drug therapy is described only briefly.

Nevertheless, while the balance of the book could be improved, this emphasis is not inconsistent with the author's clinical perspective. This is not a source book of psychiatry, but a guide to approaching and handling the mentally disturbed. Dr. Berger does not ignore standard material but subordinates it to his primary subject matter, the patient as a person.

Every page reveals genuine concern and compassion. All health-care workers, both the experienced and the uninitiated, could benefit from Dr. Berger's humane insight into the patient as an individual.

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